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Abstract: Transformative learning is the learning that takes place as a person forms and reforms meaning. This article provides an overview of the transformative learning theory developed by Jack Mezirow. The article provides an overview of Mezirow's theory and why it is appropriate for adult education. The article describes transformative learning theory in detail and discusses best practices for educators. Also covered are critical views of transformative learning theory.

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Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is the learning that takes place as a person forms and reforms meaning. This article provides an overview of the transformative learning theory developed by Jack Mezirow. The article provides an overview of Mezirow's theory and why it is appropriate for adult education. The article describes transformative learning theory in detail and discusses best practices for educators. Also covered are critical views of transformative learning theory.

Keywords Adult Education; Autonomous Thinking; Constructivism; Experiential Learning; Frames of Reference; Habits of Mind; Point of View; Transformative Learning

Overview

What is Transformative Learning?

According to Jack Mezirow, the founder of transformative learning theory, a defining condition of the human experience is that we have to make meaning of our lives (Mezirow, 1997). Transformative learning is the learning that takes place as a person forms and reforms this meaning. It has become a hot topic in adult education due to its involvement more than classroom learning and connects learning to the learner's own life (Florida State University, 2002). Mezirow believes that in today's world people must learn to make their own interpretations as opposed to listening to and acting on the beliefs and explanations of others. The goal of adult education is to facilitate this understanding rather than to provide it. The goal of transformative learning is to develop "autonomous thinking" (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow developed the theory of transformative learning in the 1970s (Florida State University, 2002). Mezirow's theory focuses on the individual as a reflective learner. Transformative learning requires the acquisition of information that upsets prior knowledge and triggers a changing of ideas and perceptions (Davis, 2006). The principles of constructivist learning are important to transformative learning because knowledge and meaning are a direct result of experience (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007). Constructivism states that meaning is constructed from a person's existing knowledge base and perception of the world.

Transformative learning occurs when a person encounters an event or situation that is inconsistent with his or her existing perspective (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007). Transformational learning experiences cause the learner to become critical of his or her beliefs and how they affect the way the learner makes sense of the world (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007).

Further Insights

Children commonly acquire the knowledge structures necessary to think autonomously. This includes the ability to recognize cause-effect relationships, make analogies and generalizations, recognize and control emotions, develop empathy, and think abstractly (Mezirow, 1997). In addition, adolescents learn to hypothesize and reflect on what they read, see, and hear. The primary goal for adult education is to strengthen and build on this foundation in order to assist the learner to become more critical in assessing one's own beliefs, values, and judgments of others (Mezirow, 1997). This awareness will allow adult learners to become more responsible and better equipped to work with others to solve problems and modify previously held beliefs (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow maintains that transformative education is extremely different than the types of education appropriate for children (Davis, 2006). Acquiring new information is just one aspect of the adult education process (Davis, 2006). Adults, throughout their lives, develop a body of associations, concepts, values, and feelings based on their experiences. These are frames of reference, the mental collection of assumptions that are responsible for how people comprehend their experiences and define their worlds (Mezirow, 1997). Once a person's frames of reference are set, it is extremely difficult to accept those that do not fit our preconceptions (Mezirow, 1997). Learning can only be meaningful when new information is integrated with existing frames of reference (Davis, 2006).

Older adults, in particular, write Lawton and La Porte (2013) of transformative learning in community art classes for seniors, have "a wealth of knowledge and experience, a broad range of interests and cognitive abilities, and a unique vantage point: the wisdom acquired with age. The reinterpreting of past experiences and understanding them in a new way may provide meaningful creative inspiration. Transformative experiences can occur for adults across cultures and generations through activities such as storytelling, social interaction, and collaborative artmaking."

Habits of Mind, Point of View

A frame of reference includes cognitive and emotional components and consists of two divisions: habits of mind and a point of view (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are abstract but habitual ways of thinking. This may be based on culture, education, socio-economics, or psychological factors (Mezirow, 1997). An example of a habit of mind is ethnocentrism, the tendency to view others outside one's own group as inferior. As a result of this habit of mind, people have mixed feelings, attitudes and may pass judgments on specific individuals or groups such as homosexuals, minorities, or the poor (Mezirow, 1997). Point of view is the perspective from which something is viewed and considered. "Habits of mind are more durable than points of view as points of view are continually changing" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6).

Critical Self-Reflection

"Transformative learning involves critical self-reflection of deeply held assumptions" (Davis, 2006, ¶ 16). The theory of transformative learning applies to adults engaged in a variety of learning environments. Mezirow explains that it requires the learner to "interpret past experiences from a new set of expectations about the future, thus giving new meaning perspectives to those experiences" (cited in Davis, 2006, "Promoting Transformation"). Transformation occurs upon the completion of a series of 10 stages the individual must go through (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007). This shift in perspective can be gradual or sudden, as the individual

moves through the stages and experiences a cognitive restructuring of experience and action (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007). The learner then begins the process of changing expectations to a more comprehensive perspective.

Mezirow believed that transformative learning takes place through experience, reflection, and discourse (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007). The process can be disruptive and uncomfortable as the learner is forced into seeing the world differently than previously accepted (Davis, 2006). Transformative learning is considered to have taken place once learners make choices or takes action based on the new understandings (Stansberry & Kymes, 2007).

The 10 Stages of Transformative Learning

Mezirow developed several stages that people experience on the way to transformation. According to Mezirow, these phases are required in order for a true transformation to take place (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999):

- Experiencing a disconcerting dilemma
- Performing an examination of self
- Critically assessing assumptions
- Recognizing that others share similar experiences
- Exploring options for action
- Building self-confidence
- Forming a plan of action
- Acquiring skills and information for implementation
- Practicing a new plan and roles
- Reintegrating into society with new perspective

“After identifying their problem or challenge, people often enter a phase where they reflect critically on this challenge. During this process, people often can no longer accept their old ways of thinking and thus they are compelled to change” (Lieb, 1991, p. 25). Finally, the learner must take action and do something in reaction to this change. This process could take a long time, and people sometimes reflect on beliefs and ideas for years before they are ready to accept new beliefs and enact change (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Processes of Transformative Learning

There are four processes or approaches to transformative learning:

- **Elaborate on an existing point of view** In this process, a learner seeks to support an initial bias and expand the range of that point of view (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). This process does not constitute an actual transformation, as it does not require the learner to change point of view; it merely asks the learner to broaden his or her definition of something.
- **Establish new points of view** - The learner encounters a new situation and creates new meaning to accommodate the situation (Mezirow, 1997). Again, this process does not require the learner to alter an

existing point of view. This process gives the opportunity to add a new point of view on something that was previously unfamiliar.

- **Transform a point of view** - Based on an experience that results in a critical reflection of the learner's misconceptions, a learner may be forced to alter their existing point of view. If this experience or similar experiences occurs repeatedly, a transformation of the learner's habits of mind make take place (Mezirow, 1997).
- **Transform a habit of mind** -These types of transformations are rare as such dramatic changes in perception that shake existing frames of reference do not occur often, but when they do the learner becomes critically reflective of a generalized bias (Mezirow, 1997).

Reflection

Reflection is a key action in the transformation process. Mezirow distinguishes among three kinds of reflection:

- **Content Reflection:** Learners ponder and evaluate the content of a problem
- **Process Reflection:** Process reflection involves a rational contemplation of strategies that could solve the problem
- **Premise Reflection:** Learners question the importance of the problem and question the assumptions underlying the problem Premise reflection can lead to transformative learning

Best Practices for Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow, transformative learning takes place through communicative learning, discourse and critical reflection. Communicative learning involves at least two people trying to comprehend the meaning of an interpretation or justify for a belief (Mezirow, 1997). Ideally, communicative learning involves reaching a consensus. It is essential for learners to become critically reflective of the assumptions underlying intentions, beliefs, and feelings (Mezirow, 1997). Discourse is a dialogue devoted to discussing competing interpretations. Critical discourse evaluates evidence, analyzes arguments, and examines differing points of view (Mezirow, 1997). People learn together through discourse by analyzing similar experiences to come to a common understanding (Mezirow, 1997). Critical reflection is where frames of reference begin to change. A learner can become critically reflective of the assumptions and interpretations upon which he or she bases his or her beliefs and habits of mind (Mezirow, 1997). Such self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations.

In addition to the three strategies, the following is a list of suggestions to help make transformative learning more successful:

- Establish and support "hot groups." Thomas Kelley and Jonathan Littman, in their book *The Art of Innovation* define hot groups as a collaboration of diverse but compatible people in pursuit of similar goals (cited in Davis, 2006). Such collaboration often generates a discourse and an energy that encourages reflection and can bring about transformation.
- Acknowledge that resistance and adverse ideas can be useful accessories in personal development (Davis, 2006). Richard Daft, a Vanderbilt University professor states, "Only the ideas you disagree with have the power to change you" (cited in Davis, 2006). Divergent opinions and creative ideas help to stimulate the phases of transformative learning. Educators who abuse dialogue over conflicting ideas can develop an environment that discourages transformative learning (Davis, 2006).

- Fail your way to success. “Management experts Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas aver that most people learn more from their mistakes than from their accomplishments” (cited in Davis, 2006, ¶ 11). Great discoveries often happen when rational thought ends and human imagination begins. “Failures and mistakes should become the catalyst for change rather than regression” (Davis, 2006, ¶ 11).

Viewpoints

Critics of Transformative Learning

Many people have criticized Mezirow's ideas (Cranton, 1996, p. 26). Some of them feel that the phases of transformation are rather artificial and that transformation can happen instantly without critical reflection (Cranton, 1996, p. 26). Many agree with Mezirow that “critical reflection is important to transformative learning, but some studies find critical reflection overemphasized rational process and overlooks the role of feelings and emotions. Studies have shown that learners who experienced a transformation responded to the initiating dilemma without reevaluating their assumptions or beliefs” (Taylor, 2001, p. 220). Instead of engaging in critical reflection, most learners trusted their assumptions and projected critique at the situation rather than the self (Taylor, 2001).

Morrice (2013) argues the importance of context for transformative learning. She draws on empirical research with refugees and considers the processes of “transforming experience and learning” that accompany transition to life in a different culture. Morrice argues for the importance of social context and nonformal learning, and suggests that models and theories based on transformative learning that *ignore* context provide “only a partial and distorted picture of the learning and identity processes at work” for the particular group of immigrants she studied (Morrice, 2013).

Adult learning is different from elementary and adolescent learning because it is voluntary, self-directed, and experiential (Baumgartner, 2007). Transformative learning theory is somewhat self-directed, but it is not problem based, experiential and often impractical (Baumgartner, 2007). Some critics argue that Mezirow's theory focuses too much on individuals (Cranton, 1996). They assert that true change requires the collaboration of society and cannot happen in an individual apart from society (Cranton, 1996). On the flip side, sometimes teachers can trigger critical reflection but need to tread lightly when it comes to how they go about it. Teachers cannot pre-plan transformative learning experiences nor can they force critical reflection (Cranton, 1996). Since adult education operates on a more voluntary basis, the learners may or may not choose to push their limits and challenge their own habits of mind (Ettling, 2006). This creates a problem when a theory cannot be effectively implemented into educational practice.

Kucukaydin and Cranton (2013) take some issue with what they describe as the “subjective” nature of transformative learning. “Knowledge about transformative learning has been constructed by a community of scholars working to explain how adults experience a deep shift in perspective that leads them to better justified and more open frames of reference,” they write. “Knowledge about transformative learning is practical in nature, and as such, it is subjective. If we accept this, then the validity of knowledge about transformative learning needs to be based on critical meaning-making through discourse” (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013).

Ethical issues can actually arise for an educator who approaches instruction from the perspective of transformative learning (Ettling, 2006). As early as 1985, Paulo Freire addressed the question of the ethics of transformative education. He asserted that the educator never has the right to impose his or her position on the learner (cited in Ettling, 2006). At the same time, an educator should never be unresponsive to social questions (Ettling, 2006). Implementing transformative learning theory requires a constant examination of an educator's methods and regular evaluation of student results as the point of view and habits of mind of the teacher are unavoidably present in the classroom (Ettling, 2006).

Mezirow's view requires educators to recognize the web of connectedness between the world and the learner. Transformation should be viewed more as a set of emerging patterns than a process to be taught and followed (Ettling, 2006). Another complication with this is that there exists little information on how to effectively apply transformative learning theory in the classroom. Thus, both the teacher and the student are works in progress (Ettling, 2006). This brings us back to the question of whether or not educators have the right to impose situations which ask learners to reevaluate their basic assumptions about the world.

The bottom line is that educators need to be vigilant in setting objectives that encourage autonomous thinking, discourse and critical reflection. Education should center on the learner and include group discourse, reflective thought and interactive problem solving. (Mezirow, 1997). Instruction that reflects life experience is designed to encourage evaluation and, if necessary, transformation, but it is up to the learner to have the necessary reflective judgment. Learning takes place through discovery as long as the student is willing to discover (Mezirow, 1997).

Conclusion

Mezirow believed that adult education is all about challenging our perceptions and previous learnings. By doing so the learner will be free from his or her imprecise concepts of the world (Cranton, 1996). In the fast paced society that is the twenty-first century, the ability to adapt to changing environments is essential and growing more important by the minute (Mezirow, 1997). Experts acknowledge that training resources should be directed toward creating a future workforce that can be critically reflective, collaborate with others and adapt to changing conditions (Mezirow, 1997).

"The educator's responsibility is to help learners reach their objectives in such a way that they will function as more autonomous, socially responsible thinkers" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 8). Reflection of outside assumptions is fundamental to effective problem solving, but critical reflection of the learner's own assumptions is the key to transforming frames of reference, and this is the key to learning for adapting to change (Mezirow, 1997).

Terms & Concepts

Adult Education: refers to the act and practice of teaching adults in the classroom, the workplace and other venues.

Autonomous Thinking: Autonomous thinking refers to thinking that is developed independently without outside influence. It is the ultimate goal of transformative learning.

Constructivism: Constructivism is a learning theory based on Jean Piaget's belief that meaning is constructed from a person's existing knowledge base and his/her perception of the world.

Experiential Learning: Experiential learning refers to learning that is derived from previous knowledge or experience.

Frames of Reference: This term refers to the mental collection of assumptions that are responsible for how they comprehend their experiences and define their worlds (Mezirow, 1997).

Habits of Mind: Habits of mind refer abstract but habitual ways of thinking. This may be based on culture, education, socio-economics, or psychological factors (Mezirow, 1997).

Point of View: Point of view refers to the perspective from which something is viewed and considered.

Transformative Learning: Transformative learning involves the gathering of information that disrupts prior knowledge and triggers a reshaping of ideas and perceptions (Davis, 2006).

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